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THE HISTORY OF LITERACY

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Abstract: The history of literacy is rarely treated together with other aspects of "the great change." This essay offers a sustained reflection on the achievements and shortcomings of quantitative research on the spread of reading and writing in the West. At the same time, it suggests several fruitful directions for further qualitative research and thereby puts the papers that follow into an argumentative context.

The history of literacy, as a regular, formal, significant, and sometimes central concern of historians of a wide range of topical, chronological, and methodological inclinations, seems firmly established today. As the inclusion of a panel on the history of literacy in a conference such as this suggests (unfortunately this is itself something of a rarity since literacy specialists have tended either to meet among themselves or with educational historians) the most active thrust in historical literacy studies over the past 10-15 years has been quantitative. That emphasis, of course, has been to enormous benefit; but it now begins to become a limitation toward new conceptualizations and, expecially, interpretations.(1)

The present state of historical literacy studies is something of an "awkward age" of development. Perhaps this should not be surprising, for historical studies in general after almost two decades of proliferating "new histories" are themselves in something of transition, evident in a hefty number of books and articles surveying the state of the craft, searching for trends, and sometimes proposing new emphases and directions (for example, Lawrence Stone's calls for retreating from social scientific and quantitative studies or hopes for "new narratives"). As the history of literacy joins the historiographical mainstream it encounters similar challenges and questions. Literacy studies, though, may be an exceptional case: for example, the distinctions between quantities and qualities exacerbate all questions of interpretation and meaning. Here, too, the quantitative record, no matter how essential to literacy's complete study and no matter how cleverly exploited, may have inherent limits at least as servere, if not more so, than in the case of demographic development of family history.

At least metaphorically, I am tempted to conceive of the field's development in terms of individual life courses of cycles, and to posit the present situation as one of late adolescence or youthfulness. I do think, however, that perhaps a generational perspective is more accurate than a life cycle one. In these terms, for the purposes of discussion and assessment, we might conceive of three modern generations of historical literacy studies.

A first generation includes principally the late-1960s work of Stone, Cipolla, and Schofield, and was foreshadowed a bit by the 1950's studies by

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Fleury and Valmary in France and Webb in England. The contributions here were several: to advance a "strong" case for the historical study of literacy - its direct study, that is, and for its import and significance as a historical factor; review the general course of literacy's chronological trends and principal transitions and passages; identify sources for fuller, systematic exploitation - primarily but not exclusively, numerical sources; advance the case(s) for the utility of routinely-generated, systematic, and sometimes comparable and "direct" measures; and posit, sometimes speculatively, the factors most closely tied to and responsible for changes in the course of literacy over time, its dynamics, distributions, impacts, and consequences.

A second generation grew directly from and was clearly stimulated by the first, more sweeping and speculative students. It includes, for example, among major studies: Schofield's later work, Egil Johansson's studies, and book-length reports by Lockridge, Furet and Ozouf, Cressy, Stevens and Soltow, Rab Houston, and myself. In addition, there may be numerous articles, monographs, local and regional studies, and theses and dissertations, mostly unpublished, especially in Great Britain and France. Here the emphasis was a larger, more detailed erection and exploitation of the quantitative record, usually but not always from signatory or census sources; greater concern for a more evidentially and sometimes also more contextually grounded historical interpretation of changing patterns - especially of distributions and differentiations in levels of literacy; relation of literacy's trends to social and economic developments, institutional interventions and state activities - especially, the availability of formal schooling and public school systems, political transformations and events like the French revolution, ideological aspects of the subject, among such factors; concern with class formations; uses of literacy in terms both of patterns of reading and individual and group attitudinal and psychological changes; increased awareness of the contradictory nature of the subject and alertness to the difficulties in building historical interpretations upon a quantitative analysis of secular trendlines and patterns of distribution and differentiation (among many other aspects). The value of comparative frameworks was also recognized, if only attempted or practiced occasionally. If we know much more about literacy's social patterns over time and the fairly systematic and patterned variations in its distributions over time and place, we are perhaps also more hesitant and cautious in explanation and attribution of meaning. The subsequent paper by G. Desert reflects this.

At the same time as the maturing of this "second generation," literacy also was "discovered" by an increasing number of historians, especially those employing quantitative methods and numerical sources which included some information on literacy (either on an aggregate, ecological or an individual level) or which were fairly easily linked to information sources on literacy. Thus, literacy increasingly featured in studies of economic change, demographic behavior, cultural development and conflict, class formation and stratification, collective actions of all kinds, family formation and structures, and the like. Interestingly, in this sphere of studies, literacy tended to be conceptualized most often as an independent variable, presumably useful in the explanation of another, dependent variable which was itself the object of more direct and sustained study.

In the growing number of studies which took literacy itself as the central object of study and discussion, literacy could be and was conceptualized as either or both dependent or independent variable. At once a source of analytic and conceptual flexibility, this could also be a problem and a source of

interpretive confusion and weakness: the nature of literacy as a (historical) variable is insufficiently examined critically.

Finally, another group of historians, most interested in cultural publishing, and/or literary topics, also tended increasingly to consider literacy within its purview. Although they least often directly studied literacy's levels and patterns, they took it as a central factor or parameter for their own work: here one thinks of press and newspaper histories, l'histoire du livre, studies of popular culture which include new interest in oral culture and its interaction with literacy, historians of print and publishing. We have learned much from such work, too much to summarize. This research, unfortunately, often remains unconnected to that mentioned above.

We also note that all such work has labored under the spectre of modernization theories with their strong assumptions of literacy's role, powers, and provenance - an issue that must be confronted. Students have chosen alternatively to challenge the assumptions of modernization's links to and impacts upon literacy (or vice versa) or to assimilate their work within its traditions, suffering conceptual and interpretive difficulties which the empirical record alone seldom meets squarely and which remain to be examined. Problems include the persisting presence of obstructive dichotomies such as literate versus illiterate, print versus oral, and the like, none of which are interpretively rich or complex enough to advance our understanding.

The third generation awaits us now. It has barely raised its head, although I have some ideas about its agendas and emphases. In part, I believe discussion should now focus upon the "needs and opportunities", questions, sources, methods of such a third generation. Egil Johansson's and Edward Stevens' papers stimulate and reinforce these reflections.

In part, two new and original directions in the social scientific study of literacy offer intriguing and tantalizing leads to historians. One example is the social-psychological work - sometimes brilliant and often path-breaking in its implications - of the experimental, ethnographic and comparative cognitive psychologists. Sylvia Scribner and Michael Cole, especially in their The Psychology of Literacy (1981) continue to study the skills, including reading and writing, required and utilized in different kinds of work settings and demands. Another such departure are the community-based ethnographies of literacy and education brought together by anthropolgist and linguist Shirley Heath in Ways with Words: Language, life and work in communities and classrooms (1983). Together, they underscore the import for literacy of context of learning and use, nature of acquisition, culture and traditions, and the like. In so doing, they offer much to historians.

Historical studies of literacy are today at a crossroads. We ask, not at all frivolously or lightly: whither historians of literacy? If the second generation - having firmly established the field - is winding down now, and if new research focused directly on literacy is diminishing while literacy deserves and demands further study and consideration, we also ought to recognize that 1) many gaps in the record remain to be completed; 2) many questions - some only relatively recently posed - remain to be answered; and 3) key problems in conceptualization, interpretation, and explanation mark these efforts.

The achievements of historical literacy studies are many and clear. No simple summary of that richness is possible here.(2) But persisting limitations also bedevil the field. Increasingly, we recognize limits of quantitative analysis alone, of aggregative or ecological methods and research de-

signs. In some ways we are only now coming to the most important questions. The partial shattering of "received wisdom", of expectations, assumptions in generations one and especially two is no small accomplishment. The obverse problem of what will replace it is in part a theoretical issue. The great debates about literacy's relationships to economic (i.e., commercial and/or industrial) or social development; political mobilization; religion; social mobility; social class formation; work and leisure life patterns; and social change more generally all reflect this. Questions about method, such as those of dependent versus independent variables; levels of aggregation; problems of correlational analysis, follow. The demand for critical reflection now falls upon conceptualization, method, and interpretation.

Rab Houston captures the spirit of this moment when he usefully comments:

> If attempts to explain structures and trends in illiteracy have been less satisfactory than simple expositions of them, analysis of the meaning of literacy is even more rudimentary. The field has seen a proliferation of merely statistical analyses of which it seems trite to say that the well-established structural measures such as regional or male-female difference must be seen in the context of social and political institutions, attitudes surrounding class and gender, but above all of the ways in which power is ordered and preserved. ... The study of education and literacy has become less anecdotal and parochial but the lack of a proper context prevents us from understanding its place in social development. Education is dealt with too much in its own terms. Even those studies which purport to analyse the interaction of education, literacy and society tend to select only a few simple aspects such as the way educational provision reflected the demands of different groups or how wealth, status and literacy overlap. Literacy can certainly be used as a valuable indicator of social divisions, but in what way did it help to preserve and perpetuate them?(3)

In one way, the path lies in moving beyond literacy as a dichotomous variable, or perceived as either conservative and controlling or as liberating. This might lead toward a cultural politics and a political economy of literacy in history. There are a number of possible avenues. Very synoptically, I would like to suggest some in conclusion as an agenda for the elusive "third generation".

Most generally, historical literacy studies must build upon their own past while also breaking away from it. The work of the "second generation", such as that of Desert, delineates parameters, baselines, and key interrelationships that offer opportunities to investigate more precisely the linkages and to seek refinements in the specification of factors and their interactions. These range from literacy's relations with class, sex, age, and culture to larger themes of economic development, social order, mobility and stratification, education and schooling, the actual uses of literacy, language and culture, etc. One demand falls upon much sharper contextual grounding, often in clearly delineated localities. Others encompass the completion of time series, among other quatitative analyses.

Second is the advancement of comparative study, requiring a greater appreciation and emphasis on source criticism and recognition of the different meanings of different measures of literacy among different populations as evidenced from varying sources. Contextualization here is also critical for comparisons, as Johansson's work illustrates. So too is the further search for indicators of the levels and the quality of literacy, allowing us to advance beyond the limiting dichotomy of literate versus illiterate. Novel

approaches to the combination of records and to record linkage stand out on the agenda.

Third is the major need for new conceptualizations of context in the historical study of literacy. Recognizing that literacy only acquires meaning and significance within specified historical contexts does not in itself reduce the risks of abstracted analysis. Novel work in anthropology and psychology, like that of Heath and Scribner and Cole, mentioned above, provides important suggestions and guidelines for historians. The tasks lie not only in defining and specifying contexts for study and interpretation but also in delineating the varying levels of context - vertically or horizontally, for example - and in experimenting with ways to operationalize them. Stevens' focus on illiterates in judicial settings and Johansson's perspective on church and community suggest two opportunities to probe more intensively. Carlo Ginzburg's writings may provide another. For the recent past, oral histories and library use records offer other possibilities.

Contexts for analysis are many and diverse. They range from those of acquisition, use, and action, to those of individual, family, group, or community or class. The scope for defined study is itself variable, but should include material conditions, motivations, opportunities, needs and demands, traditions, and transformations. In this way, linguistic forms, dialects, communication channels and networks, "pushes" and "pulls" from religion, culture, politics, the economcy, etc. may be incorporated. Literacy's relationship to personal and/or collective efficacy and activism - a source of much debate - may also be further explored, in part in analysis of specific events and processes and in part in terms of patterns of communications and mobilization within defined contexts. Class formation and vital behavior are just two of the many key topics calling for examination.

Are "historical ethnographies" of literacy possible? There are hints in a number of recent studies in popular culture - for example, those of Carlo Ginzburg, Peter Burke, Emmnauel LeRoy Ladurie, Bob Scribner, Keith Wrightson and David Levine, and Rhys Isaac - which merit fuller examination. Clearly, the subject and its significance stimulate a fair test. The current interest within anthropology and movement toward and anthropology of education in ethnographies of reading and writing at varying levels of context and generality are guides to follow.

On the one hand, literacy may be viewed as one among other "media" and its roles and impacts evaluated. On the other hand, ethnographic and communicative approaches have the potential to expand perspectives while simultaneously grounding them more precisely for meaningful interpretation. Novel contextualization can also be a boost to the renewal and refinement of quantitative studies. Context, in sum, offers both new and better cases for study, opportunities for explanation, and approaches to literacy's changing and variable historical meanings and contributions.

A fourth consideration is the difficult but severe demand for critical examination of the conceptualization of literacy itself. The "second generation" hat taught us about the contradictions central to literacy's history. It has also revealed the problems in treating literacy as an independent variable and the confusions that come from treating literacy as either or both dependent and independent. Questions of contextualization may well limit analysis of literacy as independent; they will also, I think, stimulate new formulations of the nature of literacy as a dependent factor. In the process, new considerations about levels and quality of literacy must transcend the related limits of the tradition of conceptualizing literacy as

a dichotomous variable. The psychological and anthropological studies promise to contribute here, too.

Fifth is the question of literacy and what might well be termed the creation of meaning. Historical study of literacy has been little influenced by recent debates in intellectual and cultural history, literary criticism, or cognitive psychology. At present cultural and intellectual history are in a significant time of ferment and wider exploration of their parameters; so too are literary criticism, cognitive and cultural psychology, and some areas of philosophy. Concerns about interactions between readers and texts, responses to writing and print, shaping of individual and collective processes of cognition, and the ways in which "meaning" is created, influenced, transmitted, and changed are common, if not always clarified. Possibly to its detriment, the history of literacy stands in isolation from them. Now perhaps is the moment to consider the grounds for interdisciplinary rapprochement. Questions about literacy's contribution to individual, class, and collective awareness, patterns of cognition (and also noncognitive attitudinal formation), and cultural behavior more generally underscore this need. The nagging issue of the uses of literacy, and their consequences, deserves new exploration.

The need for a sharper theoretical awareness of the relevance of the history of literacy for many important aspects of social, economic, and psychological theory, constitutes a sixth point. This is implied in the foregoing. Historical studies of literacy do provide significant opportunities for testing theories, and in so far as their results continue to raise criticisms of "normative" theoretical expectations and assumptions, there may be prospects for essaying new formulations.

A seventh consideration, raised as a question of methodology, indeed of epistemology, links all of the above. Has the tradition, from two generations of studies, of taking literacy as primary object of analysis - "the history of literacy" per se - approached an end point? Should a "third generation" rooted at least in part in the foregoing refocus itself in terms of literacy as a significant - indeed a necessary - aspect of other relevant investigations? The question, simply put, is that of shifting from "historical studies of literacy" to "histories that encompass literacy within their context and conceptualization," from "the history of literacy" to "literacy in history". There is reason to argue that the limits of the "second generation's" conceptualization encourage the exploration of what that transformation would entail.

Finally, I call attention to the relevance of the history of literacy for a number of policy areas in societies developed and underdeveloped today. Historical analysis can contribute to understanding and fashioning responses to deal with those problems that are sometimes deemed "literacy crises". In grasping that there are many paths to literacy, that literacy's relations to social and economic development are complex, that the quantity and the quality of literacy (and literacy's possession and its use) are not linearly related, that the consequences of literacy are neither direct nor simple, and that literacy is never neutral, historians have much to share with their fellow citizens and to offer those who formulate social policies. That in itself is no small contribution.

FOOTNOTES

1 These brief reflections derive from comments presented at the session on literacy at the May, 1984, Bellagio Conference. For reasons of economy and space, I shall not present bibliographic citations for the text; interested readers may refer to my Literacy in History: An Interdisciplinary Research Bibliography (New York: Garland, 1981) and The Legacies of Literacy: Continuities and Contradictions in Western Society and Culture (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, forthcoming). Some of the major examples of historical scholarship are collected in my Literacy and Social Development in the West: A Reader (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

2 In addition to my work cited above, see the excellent recent statement of Rab Houston, "Literacy and Society in the West, 1500-1850," Social History, 8 (1983), 269-293.

3 Houston, "Literacy and Society", p. 279.

REFLECTIONS SUR LES PROGRES DE L'ALPHABETISATION DANS LA FRANCE DU XIXe SIECLE

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Abstract: While the rough outlines of the spread of literacy are known, there are still many open questions about the dispersion of reading and writing. This article explores some fresh French sources (court and census records) and analyzes the diffusion of literacy by sex, region and age. The complex discussion of socio-economic propellants and retardants of reading and writing ultimately centers on the notion of "cultural environment" which yields a geography of literacy.

Les progrès de l'alphabétisation dans la France contemporaine ont été fort bien disséqués par F. Furet et J. Ozouf. Il ne s'agit aucunement de reprendre leurs analyses, de les confirmer ou de les infirmer, mais seulement de les aborder dans une optique différente, avant tout sérielle. Les bases de cette réflexion sont constituées par le degré d'instruction des conscrits, les signatures des conjoints lors de leur mariage, les données fournies par les recensements de la population de 1901 et 1911. Ces derniers considèrent comme illettré tout individu "qui ne sait pas à la fois lire et écrire" (1901, tome 1, p.XII). Est donc considéré comme tel celui qui sait seulement lire. Ces données présentent un double avantage pour le chercheur. En premier lieu, elles lui fornissent des renseignements rétrospectifs, par périodes quinquennales, sur au moins 85 ans, ce qui permet de remonter jusqu'aux Premier Empire dans sa totalité, en 1901, et jusqu'à ses dernières années en 1911. En second lieu elles portent sur des échantillons très représentatifs puisque toujours supérieurs, même pour les âges les plus élèves, à plusieurs dizaines de milliers d'individus. On comprend alors que le rapporteur du dénombrement de 1911 précise que les indications collectées fournissent "des résultats plus sûrs et plus complets que les renseignements indirects sur la diffusion de l'instruction primaire: détermination du nombre des enfants fréquentant les écoles, du nombre des conscrits illettrés, du nombre des conjoints qui n'ont pu signer leur acte de mariage" (1911, tome 1, 2e partie, p. 44).

Faut-il en conclure que l'on possède avec les recensements une source parfaite? Nous ne le pensons pas surtout en ce qui concerne les personnes les plus âgées. Leur degré d'analphabétisme est certainement sous-évalué du fait de l'inégalité sociale devant la mort qui favorise les éléments ayant eu les plus grandes chances d'acquérir le savoir élémentaire. Néanmoins, la différence par rapport à la réalité ne peut être que minime. D'ailleurs aucune des sources disponibles n'est parfaite. Le degré d'instruction des conscrits, par exemple, n'est aucunement vérifié par un examen avant 1924. Les autorités se contentent de la déclaration du conscrit lui-même ou du maire de sa commune. Quant aux signatures des conjoints, elles englobent les signatures dessinées qui ne prouvent aucunement que l'époux ou l'épouse sait lire et écrire. Malgré leur caractère approximatif les données collectées se recoupent assez bien - signatures au mariage et résultats des dénombrements -, sauf peut-être celles con-

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